

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4904

May 21, 2009

The Honorable Arne Duncan
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

In light of your plans to visit at least fifteen states over the next several months to discuss education reform, I write to ask that you consider visiting Wisconsin as part of your "Listening and Learning: A Conversation about Education Reform" tour. It is critically important for federal policymakers to hear how federal legislation impacts real people and real communities and I commend you for undertaking this nationwide listening tour and having conversations about federal education policy in communities around the country. The feedback I have received from Wisconsin's students, teachers, parents, and community leaders has informed my education policymaking decisions since coming to the U.S. Senate and these Wisconsin stakeholders could also provide unique and thoughtful advice to you as you continue your education reform tour.

Every year, I hold a listening session in every Wisconsin county and my constituents who have come to these listening sessions over the years have provided many thoughts about Wisconsin's education system and how federal education policies impact Wisconsin's schools. Since 2001, much of that feedback has centered on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The many concerns I heard about the draft NCLB legislation during my listening sessions in 2001 informed my decision for vote against the legislation as well as my subsequent efforts to reform the law. Many of Wisconsin's teachers, parents, and administrators have told me they welcome accountability in their schools, but that NCLB, with its emphasis on high-stakes testing, was the wrong way to achieve accountability.

Wisconsinites have voiced strong criticisms about the quality of the standardized tests used to satisfy NCLB's mandates. Educators, parents, and students have also criticized the law's primary focus on reading and math and have reported that other subjects such as arts, social studies, physical education, and music have been set aside to make more time for reading and math instruction. While my constituents acknowledge that some form of testing is necessary and that reading and math are important subjects, they have recommended that the federal law be revised to include multiple measures of student

achievement so that schools are not judged primarily on a single set of reading and math scores.

Some Wisconsinites have also suggested that the federal government assist in the development of better assessments that can replace the high-stakes, multiple choice tests that are used now, and this input was crucial in the development of my legislation that seeks to support some of these vital testing reforms. I know that the Obama administration has also discussed the need to develop better assessments that more accurately measure critical-thinking skills and I look forward to working with you to develop these proposals during the reauthorization of ESEA.

The Wisconsin education community also continues to work diligently to promote state and local reforms that seek to improve the quality of Wisconsin's schools and close the persistent achievement gap among Wisconsin's students. The state of Wisconsin has made great strides in expanding access to pre-K for more Wisconsin children. Access to high quality early childhood education is a necessary tool in combating the achievement gap that exists among low-income children and their more affluent counterparts, and Wisconsin's policymakers are working to improve access to these programs as well as to improve professional development opportunities for Wisconsin's early childhood educators.

Wisconsin's school districts are also working to improve educational opportunities for our high school students by instituting reforms in the state's high schools through the development of more innovative partnerships between schools, businesses, and community organizations. These partnerships can better ensure that high school graduates are prepared for college and the workforce and can lead to more engaging curriculums for high school students, which can help motivate students to complete their high school careers. The state has also fostered additional partnerships between communities and schools by supporting impressive service-learning programs for students of all ages. These service-learning opportunities teach students about the importance of being good stewards of their community while providing hands-on experiences that complement the work going on in Wisconsin's classrooms.

While there is a lot of innovative work going on in Wisconsin, the state also faces a series of pressing education challenges in its schools, including most significantly a large achievement gap and graduation rate gap among the state's minority students. After decades of civil rights struggles, public education should provide all our students equal opportunities, but the quality of public education provided to students of color and low-income students in Wisconsin still does not come close to affording many of these students an equal chance for success. While the data to come out of NCLB's testing policies has shone a brighter light on this persistent achievement gap, the standardized testing required under NCLB has not led to a significant closing of the achievement gap in the state. I encourage you to come visit some of Wisconsin's urban and rural schools to discuss these challenges with students and educators as well as how the federal law can

be revised to implement reforms that will really close the achievement gap and finally give these children an equal opportunity to succeed.

This listening tour is an important and necessary first step in the development of a new, reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act and I look forward to working with you as this reauthorization process moves forward. Wisconsinites' thoughtful feedback on the testing and accountability mandates at the core of NCLB, their efforts related to early childhood education, high school reform, and expanded service-learning opportunities, and their work to address the persistent achievement gap in the state all make Wisconsin a critical place for you to consider visiting on your education reform listening tour. Thank you for your attention to this request and I look forward to your prompt reply.

Sincerely,



Russell D. Feingold
United States Senator